

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS THROUGH FEMINIST THOUGHT: NARRATIVES AND PRACTICES REIMAGINED

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ABSTRACT

In Indian mythology, feminist theory significantly shapes cultural narratives and practices. By challenging the male-dominated power structures prevalent in individual relationships and society at large, feminist interpretations shed light on the roles and concerns of female characters, questioning traditional patriarchal views. This feminist re-examination influences practices such as women's participation in rituals and worship and advocates for women's rights and gender equality. It also critiques patriarchal customs and traditions.

Feminist perspectives have inspired new literary and artistic works, further amplifying feminist voices in Indian mythology. Epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata portray mothers in complex and diverse ways, reflecting both patriarchal and feminist themes. A feminist approach to these texts acknowledges the empowering and restrictive aspects of these depictions, recognizing their historical and cultural contexts.

Feminist attributes include complexity, refinement, critique of patriarchal values, and the recognition of nurturing and self-sacrificing motherhood as sources of strength. Mothers like Kausalya (Rama's mother), Gandhari (Dhritarashtra's wife), and Kunti (the mother of the Pandavas) wield significant influence over their sons, shaping their actions and decisions. These mothers are often portrayed as selfless caregivers, prioritizing their children's needs above their own. While these portrayals highlight their strength and devotion, they also reinforce traditional feminine ideals. The epics critique the expectation of maternal self-sacrifice, as seen in Kunti's sacrifices for her sons.

Feminist theory reshapes cultural narratives and practices, promoting a more equitable society. Its influence continues to evolve, driving social change and challenging existing norms. The feminist movement has played a pivotal role in advocating for women's suffrage, greater access to education, and confronting societal injustices linked to class, culture, religion, sexuality, gender, race, and nationality. Feminist literary theory has deliberately transgressed traditional boundaries across literature, social sciences, and philosophy, helping us understand how gender has been constructed and represented through language.

Key words: Patriarchy, Feminist, cultural practices, motherhood, self-sacrifice, suffrage, social injustice, strength.

Introduction

Feminism examines the roots of women's oppression and seeks to achieve their liberation. Some writers define women's liberation as social equality with men, while others address class biases through various forms of feminism such as bourgeois feminism, career feminism, mainstream feminism, or liberal feminism. Feminism is based on the belief that women are disadvantaged in modern society and should have equal opportunities with men. It advocates for economic, social, and political equality for women, ensuring that both men and women are treated equally.

Gender is shaped by cultural forces, formed through human relations influenced by tradition. Feminism aims to eradicate inferiority and oppression, promoting justice and equality. Early feminists viewed gender as culturally, not just biologically, constructed and opposed the mistreatment of women. Differences in opinion between women from developed and developing nations have been evident at international conferences. Women from less developed countries protested that issues like the veil and female genital surgery were prioritized without their input.

Rise of Feminism

European feminists have often focused on the advancement of womanhood, while Americans emphasize equality of rights as the essence of feminism. In 20th-century Germany, women's movements considered themselves feminist, developing a significant critical ideology. The

importance of gender difference was highlighted in the women's liberation movement of the 1970s, with feminism demanding equality for women in social standing, freedom of thought and action, and the choices they make in life.

The Concept of Feminism in Indian Narratives:

In Indian literature, women novelists have made a notable impact with their fierce and nuanced sensibilities. These writers examine the socioeconomic and cultural contexts of society, exploring various customs and practices in which female characters navigate their roles. They portray women who challenge existing societal norms, rejecting the idea of submissiveness, sacrifice, and suffering. Their female characters often rebel against oppression rather than surrendering to it. The consciousness of femininity is subtly woven into their writings. After 1980, Indian women novelists demonstrated strong stability and strength, positioning themselves in diverse perspectives. The history of women novelists in India reflects a persistent struggle for recognition and equality.

Indian women novelists have played a pivotal role in shaping feminist discourse through English literature. Their fierce and often obscure sensibilities reflect the socioeconomic and cultural frameworks of their times. These writers delve deeply into societal norms, customs, and practices, highlighting the roles and struggles of female characters. The women they portray often rebel against societal constraints, challenging the notions of submissive sacrifice and suffering.

Renowned Indian Fiction Writers and Their Contributions to Feminism

Shashi Deshpande's characters are educated, self-conscious, and sensitive. They often find themselves at odds with familial, traditional, and social expectations. Her first novel, "Roots and Shadows," features two strong female protagonists who embody this conflict.

Kamala Markandeya's female characters maintain their identity and strength of mind while revolting against societal norms. They present a balanced approach, neither losing themselves nor conforming entirely to societal expectations.

Anita Desai's novels are predominantly women-oriented, portraying characters who symbolize both growth and change as well as withdrawal and destruction. Her women are depicted as liberated, with depth that transcends psychological and philosophical boundaries. For instance, Maya in "Voices in the City" reflects these complex dimensions. Desai's first three novels—"Cry, the Peacock," "Voices in the City," and "Fasting, Feasting"—showcase the evolving psychic awareness of women in society.

Shobha De and Bharathi Mukherjee:

These novelists, alongside Mukherjee and Desai, address the suppression and oppression of women by patriarchy. Their works explore themes of frustration, rejection, revenge, and the breaking of conventional expectations. Mukherjee, Desai, and De's novels focus on the self-discovery of their female characters, drawing significant influence from Virginia Woolf. They vividly portray the subjugation and subduing of women in India.

Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni:

Diaspora writers like Divakaruni and Lahiri have extended Indian sentiments to foreign readers, potentially guiding future women writers. Divakaruni's works are deeply inspired by Indian myths and legends, such as Sita from the Ramayana and Draupadi from the Mahabharata. Her novel "The Palace of Illusions" reimagines the life of Panchali, the wife of the Pandavas, giving her a powerful, searing voice in a universe dominated by warriors and divine beings.

Concept of Feminism in Early Indian Literature

Early historical texts like the Rigveda highlight the equality of women, asserting that both daughters and sons have equal rights to their father's property. Women were considered "Shakti" (power), and significant female figures in the Vedas and Upanishads, like Gargi and Maitreyi, who were renowned

scholars and philosophers of their times. These texts often depict women as equals, contributing to spiritual and intellectual discourses.

Characters such as Sita, Draupadi, Savitri, and Kunti from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata are celebrated for their strength and virtues. These characters have been reinterpreted by modern feminist writers to emphasize their resilience and agency. For instance, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's portrayal of Panchali in "The Palace of Illusions" highlights her as a strong, vocal female character in a patriarchal world.

Cultural feminists in India have sought to create an environment free of masculinized values. They celebrate ancient women scholars and mythological figures who embody feminist ideals. Modern feminist writers draw upon these cultural narratives to challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for gender equality.

Bhattacharya says, "modern day women could well wish that they were half as confident, clear-headed and assertive of their desires and goals as Satyawati. She was confident, assertive of her desires, fiercely independent woman, a truly empowered woman. Her legend is mentioned elaborately in later textbooks such as Harivamsa and Devi Bhagavata Purana."

Early Indian Literature and Feminism

Throughout history, women have often been subjected to prejudice and gender discrimination. However, ancient Indian texts offer a more complex and empowering perspective on women's roles and rights.

The Rigveda, one of the oldest sacred texts, clearly states that women are the equal halves of men and should participate equally in all activities. It affirms that both daughters and sons have equal rights to their father's property.

Ramayana:

The Ramayana presents women like Sita, Urmila, Mandodari, and Kausalya as role models. These characters, through their strength, virtue, and resilience, exemplify the esteemed position of women in ancient narratives. Ravana's downfall is attributed to his abduction of Sita, demonstrating the significant consequences of disrespecting women.

Upanishads:

In the Upanishads, women like Gargi and Maitreyi are portrayed as equals in spiritual and philosophical discourses. Gargi, a Vedic prophetess, questioned the origins of human existence and composed numerous hymns. Maitreyi, the wife of sage Yajnavalkya, prioritized spiritual knowledge over worldly wealth, reflecting her deep philosophical aspirations.

Decline During the Mauryan Period

Despite the egalitarian views in the Vedas and Upanishads, the Mauryan period saw the rise of patriarchal practices such as child marriages, Sati (widow immolation), and the purdah system (seclusion of women). These practices marked a decline in the status and freedom of women, which cultural feminists have since sought to rectify.

Some Ancient Women who made impact on Society

Gargi, daughter of sage Vachaknu, was a renowned Vedic prophetess who contributed to the spiritual growth of her contemporaries. Maitreyi, known for her high spiritual aspirations, engaged deeply with philosophical questions, showing that women were integral to ancient intellectual traditions.

Anasuya, wife of sage Atri, was celebrated for her chastity and devotion, positively endured a test by the Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva), emerging as a paragon of wifely virtues.

Ahalya the wife of sage Gautama, and her story of seduction by Indra in disguise and her ensuing redemption by Rama highlights themes of purity, penance, and forgiveness.

Queen of Sikhidwaja, Cudala attained spiritual enlightenment and taught the same to her husband, demonstrating women's capacity for both worldly and spiritual leadership.

Savithri, wife of Satyavan, knowing his fated early death, with her devotion and chastity impressed Yama, the god of death, who granted her husband a long life.

Lopamudra who was the wife of sage Agastya, was a scholar and philosopher, embodying intellectual and spiritual equality with men.

Meerabhai a spiritual poet and devotee of Lord Krishna, rejected traditional roles and focused on spiritual and poetic pursuits.

Akkamahadevi a Kannada (vachanakarti) spiritual poet, like Meera renounced royal life, rejected patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles, emphasizing female solidarity and independence.

Interpretation of Indian Narratives in Mythology Retold:

Sita's decisions in the Ramayana, to go along with Rama during his exile and resisting Ravana's advances, challenge traditional gender roles and assert female strength and independence. Her Agnipariksha (trial by fire) raises questions about societal expectations and the role of women. The same Sita in the end puts her foot down when asked to go back to Ayodhya, after he meets her with Luv and Kush. She decides not to endure humility any more by Ayodhya's citizens and takes shelter with mother earth.

In Kavitha Kane's "Sita's Sister," Urmila is portrayed as a quiet sufferer and a pillar of support, breaking the ideology of neglected women in mythology. Kane's depiction of Meenakshi's transformation into Surpanakha in "Sita's Sister" explores the psychological conflict and societal rejection faced by women. Dhanalakshmi Ayyer's portrayal of Satyavati in "Satyavati" highlights her ambition and the complexities of maternal aspirations and power dynamics in ancient narratives.

Madhavi Mahadevan's "The Kauntheyas" explores the feminist portrayal of Kunti, emphasizing her emotional intensity and the silent struggles of female voices in history. The narrative underscores the need for women's stories to be heard and acknowledged.

Aditi Banerjee's "The Curse of Gandhari" Gandhari is portrayed as a powerful and complex character, whose selfless love and strength are motivational. Her curse on Krishna, which led to the downfall of the Yadavas, exemplifies her formidable influence.

The role and representation of women in literature, both ancient and modern, reflect evolving attitudes towards gender equality and feminist ideals. From mythological texts to contemporary novels, the depiction of female characters has been central to understanding the progress and challenges of feminism.

Cultural Narratives and Feminism:

Feminism is a social, political, and cultural movement aimed at establishing and defending equal rights and opportunities for all genders, with a particular focus on addressing the historical and systemic inequalities faced by women. The movement seeks to challenge and dismantle gender-based discrimination, advocating for women's rights in areas such as politics, education, employment, and personal autonomy.

Intersectional Feminism overlaps with gender discrimination and acknowledges different forms of oppression such as race, class and sexuality. It involves a more intimate approach to Feminism.

While Liberal Feminism emphasizes that only through legal and political reforms we can achieve gender equality, Radical feminism insists on dismantling patriarchy as a fundamental system of power to achieve liberty and empowerment.

Socialist Feminism is achieved through the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy, and focuses on establishing economic and class-based reforms to achieve gender equality. Feminism continues to evolve and address all forms of gender-based oppression in contemporary society which enables in creating a world where everyone has equal rights and opportunities.

Impact of Feminism on Religion and Spirituality:

Feminism has reinterpreted religious texts to advocate for gender equality and inclusion of women in spiritual leadership roles.

Feminism has profoundly transformed Indian culture and society, challenging deep-rooted patriarchal norms and advocating for gender equality across various dimensions. Historically, Indian society has oscillated between acknowledging women's significant contributions and relegating them to subordinate roles. Ancient texts like the Rigveda and Upanishads celebrated women's intellectual and spiritual capabilities, with scholars like Gargi and Maitreyi exemplifying the respect accorded to female intellect. However, societal structures over time, particularly during the Mauryan period, entrenched practices like child marriages, Sati, and purdah, severely restricting women's freedoms and rights. Feminism in India emerged as a response to these systemic inequalities, advocating for a re-examination and dismantling of oppressive traditions.

The feminist movement in India has catalyzed significant shifts in cultural narratives and social practices. It has confronted traditional depictions of women as passive, dependent figures, instead promoting stories that highlight women as leaders, adventurers, and complex individuals. This shift is evident in modern literary works and media representations, where female characters are portrayed as dynamic, independent, and central to the narrative. For instance, contemporary retellings of mythological tales, such as Madhavi Mahadevan's "The Kauntheys" and Aditi Banerjee's "The Curse of Gandhari," reinterpret historical female figures like Kunti and Gandhari, emphasizing their strength, resilience, and agency. These narratives not only reclaim women's voices but also inspire contemporary readers to recognize the importance of female empowerment.

Summing Up

Impact of Feminism on Social and Cultural narratives

Feminism has transformed cultural and social narratives, as times changed. It is a little slow in India when compared to our western counterparts. Feminism has primarily restructured the gender roles, cultural identity and social and familial relationships. Since time immemorial, our cultural and mythological narratives have depicted men as the decision makers and heroes. Women have been made to take Subordinate roles as mothers or caregivers and ornamental roles or items of male desire. These stereotypes roles are contested by feminism and has tried to represent women in modern liberated roles in literature.

Feminism has played a major role in re- interpreting and shaping women characters as individuals with complex minds, with their aims and ambitions and dreams. In Modern day contemporary literature, female characters portray major roles and are protagonists in some of them steering through professional and personal lives and meeting all the challenges posed by them individually with resilience. This shift in roles is depicted by female authors more. Many authors have narrated mythology and history and reinterpreted with feminist perspective, seeing the events through women character. Chitra Divakaruni, Iravati Karve, Madhavi Mahadevan and Aditi Banerjee have seen Ramayana and Mahabharata through the eyes of Dhrapadi, Sita, Kunti, Gandhari, Urmila, Vrishali etc., showing their mental strength, wisdom and emotional integrity. The female characters otherwise suppressed are shown exhibiting their courage and inclusivity in dealing with various situations.

Feminism is responsible for reviewing the traditional binary of male and female. Feminism has challenged the normal rigid gender roles that command individuals to behave in a certain sexist role, and has encouraged the modern easy flowing characters with individual gender identity. The modern feminist narratives have depicted women in diverse roles with opportunity to express themselves disregarding all gender norms of the society. Some writers focus their narratives on intersectionality in their feminist works thus exhibiting interconnectedness of gender with race, class and sexuality which are all other identity issues. This approach helps the marginalized groups gain their identity in this wide cultural landscape of ours.

Feminism has definitely made a significant impact on the relationships in a family and expectations of society. It also encourages individuals to share their domestic and care-giving responsibilities, which earlier were considered as sole domain of women. This swing towards egalitarian relationships is depicted in feminist narratives where men and women share all responsibilities equally thus ensuring happiness in domestic life. Feminism is thus responsible for redefining the societal norms and stereotype roles of men and women and making them equal partners in domestic chores and financial responsibilities thus ensuring balance in family.


Impact of feminism is not limited to family responsibilities but extends to all places of work. Women are seen working in various fields and are exercising their rights in educating themselves in all disciplines. Feminism influenced cultural narratives celebrate achievements in various male dominated arenas. This movement is responsible for rewriting rules regulations bringing in policies to support professional growth. Schemes such as maternity leave, equal pay and prevention of sexual harassment in both educational institutions and workplaces are mooted. Society has seen women in responsible positions like, Chief Ministers, Prime Ministers, Armed Forces and to encourage women's advancement seats are exclusively reserved for women in legislative fields and Assemblies.

Feminist Authors have revisited and reimagined religious and spiritual narratives and have rewritten texts with feminist perspective. Patriarchal views and interpretations are challenged and inclusivity is brought in even in religious and spiritual fields. Impact of feminism in social and cultural narratives is profound. It is responsible for empowering in narratives thus paving way for changes in reality. Through these narratives which reflect reforms where in gender has ceased to determine roles and responsibilities. These narratives which challenge traditional practices and encourage and empower women thus bringing in inclusive society. As feminism continues to evolve, it remains a powerful force for cultural and social transformation, fostering a society that values and respects the contributions and rights of all its members.

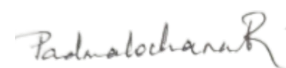
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